

## Authority and Authenticity in Art Writing

Review of:

Matthias Krüger, Léa Kuhn, Ulrich Pfisterer (Eds): *Pro Domo. Kunstgeschichte in eigener Sache*, Paderborn: Brill Fink 2021. ISBN: 978-3-8467-6506-7, 405 p., €73.83.

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Much of art historiography has been shaped by writings about artists that were penned by individuals who had privileged, immediate access to their subject. Many of these texts, written by friends, lovers, family members, or pupils of the artist, have become standard reference points for subsequent scholarly literature. To name just a few examples: Ascanio Condivi's *Life of Michelangelo* was authorised by the master himself; Bernini's time in Paris is documented by the collector and connoisseur Paul Fréart de Chantelou; the life of Jacques-Louis David was first recorded by one of his favourite pupils, Étienne-Jean Delécluze; Jacob Philipp Hackert probably owes a good part of his fame to a biography authored by his friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; the letters of Philipp Otto Runge or Anne-Louis Girodet were edited and published by the artist's brother and pupil respectively; the myth of Picasso was fostered by his friend Apollinaire; and much of what we know about Paul Cézanne's thoughts about art were recorded in conversations with a young admirer, Joachim Gasquet.

Many of these texts have been the subject of sustained critical study: it is perhaps unsurprising that accounts written by those close to an artist tend to show a certain bias. More often than not, reminiscences by an artist's confidante are anything but sober, factual accounts – instead, they are highly stylized interventions and attempts to shape the reception and legacy of their subject. Yet – and this is striking – comparatively little effort has been invested to date on discussing these texts *as a genre* in its own right.

The volume *Pro Domo. Kunstgeschichte in eigener Sache* aims to address this lacuna. The editors are interested in the power dynamics that underlie historiography produced, so to speak, 'in-house', by friends and confidantes of an artist who had direct access to their subjects. As the title suggests, such 'in-house' productions are frequently characterised by a *parti pris* 'for the house' (*pro domo*). The editors propose to understand this intersection of artistic practice and literary commentary as a complexly interrelated constellation. Granting a prospective author access to their 'house' / studio allows an artist, among other things, to influence their posthumous reception – thus turning textual commentary into a form of 'postproduction' (9). Cultivating confidantes who subsequently publish accounts of one's private life allowed many artists to retain control over the interpretation of their work, and indeed to shape historiography. Many artists did

so very successfully indeed: it is a much-observed fact that artists who were subject of a biographical account during their own lifetime are much more likely to attract further monographic attention by later scholars.

For the reading public, the potential 'biases' of such texts seem comparatively unimportant when weighed against the gains they promise. The immediacy of access to a master's studio and mind gives these writings an air of authority and authenticity. At the same time, they also cater for the interests of voyeuristic readers that are less keen on art historical facts but in glimpses of an artist's private life. The volume thus aptly opens with a discussion of David Douglas Duncan's photographs of *The Private World of Pablo Picasso*, showing the master for example in the bathtub or playing with his dogs. In many respects, these 'in-house' publications gain their *raison d'être* as purveyor of 'anecdotes', in the original sense of the word: they are 'secret histories'. Thanks to having privileged access, the artist's confidantes are able to provide a glimpse behind the scenes – illuminating the master's passions, but also the numinous workings of his (the chapters of the volume deal indeed almost exclusively with male artists) mind and studio. Analysing the production and reception of these texts thus promises fresh insights into historic concepts of the artist, as well as in the power dynamics that shape the art historical canon.

The edited collection thus has a strong and stimulating intellectual framework. In eighteen essays, the volume provides a range of case studies, discussing instances where an artist's life was documented by a close associate, who was able to claim an authoritative perspective on the subject they knew so well. Though there is a certain emphasis on contemporary art, case studies range widely: from Renaissance Florence and Bernini, over Tischbein and Monet, to Robert Mapplethorpe and the Guerilla Girls. A number of contributions also spotlight genres that are rarely studied by historiography, for example newspaper interviews and artist websites.

As so often with edited collections, the editors themselves seem to understand – unsurprisingly perhaps – their own ideas best. Ulrich Pfisterer interrogates the importance of genealogy and belonging in the self-fashioning of Renaissance artists. The notion 'pro domo' in this case is best understood literally: many of the artists discussed were members of a workshop or family dynasty of artists, and actually lived and worked in a shared household. Pfisterer's analysis draws not only on texts, but also on double portraits and portrait series that were displayed in artists' houses – as advertisement and plea of allegiance with past masters. The artist's house (and studio) thus became a veritable vehicle for advertising the inhabitant's professional qualities.

In an astonishingly dense and complex tour-de-force, Matthias Krüger analyses the friendship between Edouard Manet and the politician Antonin Proust. The essay gravitates around Manet's 1880 portrait of Proust, where the sitter was identified in a dedicatory inscription as the artist's friend. Later on, Proust published a book of *souvenirs* of Manet, where he also commented extensively on the genesis of his portrait. Both painter and biographer delight in a dazzling array of intertextual and inter pictorial references, using their canvas and publication as an

opportunity to weave a dense net of cultural references that were probably exceedingly hard for bystanders to decipher. Krüger convincingly interprets these continuous ripostes – some public, some private – as an attempt to cement and celebrate their mutual friendship.

Léa Kuhn focuses on the agency of the subject of ‘pro domo’ writings – the artist himself. Kuhn compares and contrasts two publications on Jean-Léon Gérôme: one by an American journalist, Fanny Field, written during Gérôme’s lifetime and honoured with a foreword written by the master himself. The second, compiled *after* the artist’s death, was written by his pupil Charles Moreau-Vauthier. Gérôme embraced Fields’ book wholeheartedly, calling it a ‘monument’ – the phrase betrays the artist’s glee about the publication’s contribution to his everlasting fame. Fields herself is more than obliging: the text betrays little of her auctorial presence, resembling instead a paean for the master penned during his lifetime. The text exudes the master’s authoritative presence. This situation changed once Gérôme had died. Moreau-Vauthier equally lionizes his teacher, yet he does so with a not-very-subtle intention – namely to promote himself, basking in the reflection of his master’s glory. Kuhn rightly describes this as the strategy of a ‘parasite’, turning Gérôme’s biography into a vainglorious and self-serving project. This juxtaposition of two books, written just on either side of the master’s demise, is extremely well chosen, as it allows to highlight one of the volume’s key hypotheses: namely that the co-presence of artist and author produces a genre of texts that is marked by a characteristic negotiation between two distinct voices and auctorial aims. Kuhn’s investigation of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of an artist’s death resonates productively with other recent interventions in reception studies, such as Catriona McAra’s study of the legacy of Leonora Carrington – another project that explicitly (and self-consciously) professes to have changed its voice and intellectual orientation after the artist’s death.<sup>1</sup>

The editors are of course far from the only contributors who provide a nuanced and illuminating discussion of the book’s overarching theme. From a conceptual point of view, one of the most stimulating essays is Julia Gelshorn’s discussion of Sherrie Levine and the critical reception (or perhaps: ‘invention’) of appropriation art in *October*. Levine’s contribution to art history is inextricably bound up with the concomitant theoretical commentary provided by critics such as Douglas Crimp or Rosalind Krauss. Critics and artists form a ‘discursive community’ where art and commentary become difficult to disentangle. Over the years, Levine’s work became the posterchild of a somewhat dogmatic idea of postmodernism, referenced only as a pictorial shorthand to refer to the theoretical debates that took her work as a starting point. Levine seems to have perceived this embrace by theory as increasingly suffocating: over the years, her artistic visibility and individuality seems to have been significantly curtailed by the predominance of her ‘house interpreters’. As Levine concluded in 1985, ‘at some point I began to feel boxed in. It had gotten to the point where people couldn’t see the work for the rhetoric’ (260). Under the conditions of postmodernity and the sway of Barthes’

<sup>1</sup> Catriona McAra, *The Medium of Leonora Carrington. A Feminist Haunting in the Contemporary Arts*, Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2023.

'death of the author', having 'in-house' interpreters evidently bore the risk of backfiring.

All contributors do their best to relate their case studies to the overarching theme of the volume. However, a number of essays nevertheless push the limits of what might count as writing 'pro domo'. Dominik Brabant's essay on the reception of Auguste Rodin is a great read and very interesting indeed, but it does not even pretend to deal with a constellation that involves a close, personal relation between artist and critic. In fact, Brabant sets out to argue that the notion of 'pro domo' publications should not be limited to writings by those close to an artist, but that it should include 'every research output which contributes to the prominence and reputation of an artist, or to an increase in public awareness for their art historical significance' (156-157). According to this definition, essentially every piece of art historiography could be classified as 'pro domo', as long as it has a certain 'impact'. Broadening the category of 'pro domo' art history in such an unspecific way probably undermines the originality and productivity of the conceptual framing proposed by the editors.

The editors take it for granted that 'being involved is an unavoidable "normality" in art historical research' (15). Philip Ursprung, in the concluding essay of the volume, explicitly argues for an art historical practice that is characterised by a 'performative' subjectivity, openly discussing one's own (biographical) interests and personal involvements with one's subject. Ursprung's approach is refreshing – a bold negation of any attempt of 'objectivity' – though one wonders whether there are still any art historians out there who would argue *against* the necessity of an awareness of one's own authorial positionality. Once again, such an approach tends to conflate a scholar's general (and indeed unavoidable) positionality with the more specific case of a direct, personal involvement between writer and subject.

Annette Tietenberg's essay on 'artistic self-representation on websites as post-studio-practice' presents a similar case. Again, the essay itself is well worth a read, and provides a pioneering discussion of a medium that has rarely been discussed by art historiography to date. She ingeniously embeds websites into a longer tradition of commercial advertising of the art trade, spanning an arc from Watteau's sign for Gersaint over Courbet's *L'atelier*. Her intriguing hypothesis is that, in cases where an artist is involved in creating and maintaining their website, this online presentation should be seen as modern-day continuation of such historic practices of self-portraiture (370). The majority of her examples, however, seems to suggest that most artists have a limited interest in maintaining their digital presence, and leave this task instead to their gallerists, who in turn commission web designers and content producers whose style is positively interchangeable and unpersonal (352). This is certainly good professional PR practice, but not exactly a close, involved form suggesting privileged and authentic insights.

The topic of the volume seems to have encouraged some contributors to engage in a performative meta-reflection on sources and authority in their own writing. Wolfgang Kemp for example openly admits that one important quotation in his essay is taken from a dodgy link in Wikipedia, which at the time of writing was not retrievable anymore – the source is lost (295). This might be intended as a

witty meta-reflection on a form of writing that relies on hearsay – but not only Philistines might find such an interpretation too generous, and thus conclude that this is simply shoddy working practice jazzed up as clever irreverence. Similar observations can be made regarding Philip Ursprung's essay. As said, Ursprung celebrates an autobiographical baring of the author: in detail, he sketches his own art historical career, and how his experiences as a student shaped his perception of contemporary art. As if to underline the subjective, unconventional take on academic writing, Ursprung's essay is littered with typos ('licence es lettres', 383, 'dir Kunstbetrieb', 384; 'exemplarisches Lebensmodelle' (385).) This is a surprising odd-one-out in an otherwise extremely well edited volume. Again, a generous interpretation might suggest that the lack of proof-reading of this essay is intended as an added layer of performative imminency. In the eyes of others, it's just carelessness and a nuisance for the reader.

I want to end this review by highlighting another essay that might, on first sight, appear a bit of an odd one out: Helga Schwalm's contribution on the '*Lives of Samuel Johnson*'. Evidently, this text is not devoted to art history, but to English literature – but this interdisciplinary broadening of the perspective makes for a particularly refreshing and strong contribution in the context of this volume. Schwalm discusses English biographical writing of the eighteenth century, and draws on Samuel Johnson as her case study. It's an excellent choice, as Johnson was both author of biographies of individuals who 'favoured' him with their 'confidence' (*Life of Richard Savage*, 1744), but also the subject of such treatment (Boswell's *Life of Johnson*). This approach allows to glean to what extent 'pro domo' writing remains conditioned by general literary trends and ideals. Schwalm embeds the many 'lives' written *by* and *about* Johnson into a broader culture of sociability and sensibility.

This (convincing) conclusion raises an important question: is 'pro domo' writing in art history a genre that follows its own tropes and protocols? Is it, for example, tied up with the idea of the studio as numinous space of creation? Is the ubiquity of anecdotal writing in art history (from Vasari onwards) setting a precedent that makes the discipline particularly susceptible to such 'secret histories'? Or is the disciplinary framework secondary – and 'pro domo art history' follows conventions and ideals that can be found in other contemporaneous texts? The auctorial constellation is by no means unique to art history: from Goethe's Eckermann to Meghan Markle's Omid Scobie, the use of a trusted mouthpiece has a long tradition across different spheres of public life. It might be interesting to situate 'pro domo art history' more strongly in an interdisciplinary framework, in order to think more broadly about questions of authority and aura in life writing. Such an approach, however, probably requires a more monographic and thematic survey of the field that would also incorporate some of the 'big names' – some of which I listed at the beginning. But this is necessarily beyond the scope of an edited volume, whose individual contributions are necessarily more prosopographic.

For now, the editors are to be commended for bringing an important sub-genre of art writing to historiographic attention, and to stimulate a reflection on issues of power, access and authority in art writing. The publication of the book

comes at an important moment in time, where many art historians increasingly champion partisanship as a positive virtue, and connect this with far-reaching political agendas. Recently, Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love have argued for 'fandom as methodology' and suggested that a showing of 'empathy, enthusiasm and love' should be regarded as valid alternative to disinterested criticality, and embraced as a tool to redress historical imbalances that led to the marginalisation of queer perspectives, or the voices of people of colour.<sup>2</sup> For anybody interested in such strategies of engaged intervention, the volume *Pro Domo* should be a required reading, to heighten awareness for the historiographic traditions of an approach rooted in personal affinities.

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love (eds), *Fandom as Methodology. A Sourcebook for Artists and Writers*, London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019.